62.

Maimonides

1135–1204

RABBI MOSES BEN MAIMON (RaMBaM) was the most eminent Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages. His most famous books are: an Arabic commentary to the Mishnah; a Hebrew law code, the *Mishneh Torah* ("Repetition of the Law"); and the Arabic philosophical work, *The Guide for the Perplexed.* Maimonides, who was born in Cordova in 1135, was compelled when still a lad to flee from Spain because of the persecutions of the fanatical Almohades. After a series of misfortunes and wanderings in northern Africa and Palestine he finally settled in Egypt, in Fustat-Cairo, in 1165, where he became a court physician.

The extracts from his letters that follow give a clear picture of the man and his activity. The first letter below is an answer to Joseph ibn Djabir of Bagdad who had written to Maimonides for enlightenment on certain questions. Ibn Djabir, who knew only Arabic, could not consult Rambam's Hebrew code, the *Mishneh Torah.* The second letter is in answer to Samuel ibn Tibbon of southern France, who was translating the *Guide for the Perplexed* into Hebrew and wished to come to Egypt to visit the famous philosopher. Both of these letters were originally written in Arabic.

1. *Maimonides' Letter to Ibn Djabir, about 1191*

"I have set the Lord always before me."

We have received the letter of the honored and esteemed elder, the disciple Joseph ben Abul-Kheir (may his soul find rest in paradise) who is known as Ibn Djabir. He mentions in it that he is an ignoramus in Jewish things. However, it is clear to us from his letter that he is making a strong effort to study Jewish lore and that he is busying himself considerably with our Arabic commentary to the Mishnah, although he does not understand the code that we have written, that is to say, the *Mishneh Torah,* because it is in Hebrew. He also mentions that he has heard of certain scholars—may God protect them—who are there in Bagdad and who have attacked us in those things which he mentions and he wishes to

answer them. [The *gaon* of Bagdad, Samuel ben Ali, attacked the views of Maimonides on resurrection.] Ibn Djabir also entreats us to write to him in order to help him in his studies and this we now do.

First let me tell you—may God maintain your worth and add to your success—that you are not an ignoramus but our disciple and friend, and so is every one who strives to cleave to the study of the Torah even though he understands but one verse or one law. It makes no difference whether one understands it through the Hebrew or Arabic or Aramaic: the thing is to understand the subject matter in whatever language it be, and this is even more true of commentaries and codes. The important fact is that you should busy yourself learning. Of any man who neglects his study or has never learnt anything it is said [Numbers 15:31]: "He has despised the word of God." Likewise any one, even though he be a great scholar, who is too lazy to increase his learning, fails to fulfill the positive commandment to study the Torah. This is as important as all other commandments put together.

In general I would like to tell you that you ought not underestimate yourself nor despair of attaining perfection. There were great scholars who began to study when they were already advanced in years and became what they were. [Tradition says Akiba, died about 132 C.E., was forty years old when he began to study.]

You ought to learn this section of the book in the original Hebrew in which we have composed it, for it is not hard to understand and very easy to learn. And after you have trained yourself in one part you will understand the entire work. [Ibn Djabir is advised to learn Hebrew from the *Mishneh Torah* and to use this code to solve his difficulties.] Under no circumstance do I desire to translate it into Arabic, for then all of its charm would be lost.

As a matter of fact I now wish to translate my [Arabic] commentary to the Mishnah and the *Book of Precepts* into the Holy Tongue. Surely then I will not translate this code into Arabic. Don't even ask it of me. [Maimonides wanted to preserve Hebrew as the Jewish national tongue.] At all events you are my brother. May God aid you and favor you with true perfection and treasure up for you the happiness of this world and the next. . . .

Moses, the son of Maimon of blessed memory.

11. *Maimonides' Letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon, 1199*

¶Only the Blessed Creator of the World knows how I have been able to write this letter to you! I have had to run away from my

fellow-men, isolating myself in some hidden nook. At times I have even had to lean for support against the wall, at other times I have had to write lying down on account of my excessive weakness, for my bodily vigor is sapped. I am pretty well advanced in years. [He was now 64 years old.]

But with respect to your wish to come here to me, I cannot but say how greatly your visit would delight me, for I truly long to commune with you, and would anticipate our meeting with even greater joy than you, although I am worried about your taking such a dangerous sea trip. [Storms and pirates were the dangers.]

Yet I must advise you not to expose yourself [to the perils of the voyage], for beyond seeing me, and my doing all I could to honor you, you would not derive any advantage from your visit. Do not expect to be able to confer with me on any scientific subject for even one hour, either by day or by night, for the following is my daily occupation:

I dwell in Fustat, and the Sultan resides at Cairo [originally a suburb of the older Fustat]; these two places are two Sabbath days' journeys distant from each other. [A Sabbath day's journey is two thousand paces.] My duties to the ruler [the regent al-Afdal, son of Saladin] are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day, early in the morning; and when he or any of his children, or any of the inmates of his harem, is indisposed, I dare not quit Cairo, but must stay during the greater part of the day in the palace.

It also frequently happens that one or two of the royal officers fall sick, and I must attend to their healing the entire day. Hence, as a rule, I repair to Cairo very early in the day, and even if nothing unusual happens, I do not return to Fustat until the afternoon. Under no circumstances do I return earlier. Then I am almost dying with hunger. I find the antechambers filled with people, both Jews and Gentiles, important and unimportant people, theologians and bailiffs, friends and foes—a mixed multitude, who await the time of my return.

I dismount from my animal, wash my hands, go forth to my patients, and beg and entreat them to bear with me while I partake of some slight refreshment, the only meal I take in the twenty-four hours. Then I go forth to attend my patients, write prescriptions and directions for their several ailments. Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes even, I solemnly assure you, until two hours in the night [eight o'clock] or even later. I converse with, and prescribe for them while lying down on my back from sheer fatigue; and when night falls, I am so exhausted, I can scarcely speak.

In consequence of this, no Israelite can speak with me or have any private interview with me, except on the Sabbath. On that day, the whole congregation, or at least, the majority of the members, come to me after the morning service, when I instruct them as to their proceedings during the whole week; we study together a little until noon, when they depart. Some of them return, and read with me after the afternoon service until evening prayers. In this manner I spend that day. I have here related to you only a part of what you would see, if by God's aid you were to visit me.

Now, when you have completed for our brethren the translation you have commenced—and now that you have begun this good work you ought to finish it—I beg that you will come joyfully to visit me, but not with the hope of deriving any advantage from your visit as regards your studies; for my time is very limited. . . .

May your happiness, my dear son and pupil, increase and grow great, and may salvation be granted to our afflicted people. Written by Moses, the son of Maimon, the Sephardi [Spaniard] of blessed memory, on the 8th of Tishri, 1511 according to the Seleucide era [September 30, 1199]. Peace!

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